

## Prayer

Praise God; though we have let you down, You have never failed us;  
You have loved us faithfully even when we have turned to our own way;  
You have a plan for our lives, and it unfolds even if we have not understood it;  
You have chosen us for glory even though we do not deserve Your blessings;  
Praise God; for You have loved us with an everlasting love; AMEN!

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Music

*Pray for people involved in music and any musicians known to you, whether working in Christian or in secular music, that they may use their skills to the praise and glory of God.*

### On-going prayers

- Give thanks for humour, and everything that makes people laugh
- Pray for those who are still suffering the effects of world recession
- Pray for children, and those who teach them about the environment

## Meditation

Speak to me, Lord,  
so that I might hear and taken notice of Your Word:  
and accept the truth of what You have done for me:

Speak to me Lord,  
so that I might recognise what you are doing in the world:  
and face the issues that You bring to my attention:

Speak to me Lord,  
so that I might honour the fellowship of Your Church:  
and worship You with all my heart, soul and strength:

Speak to me Lord,  
so that I might give my energy to Your work and service:  
and not lose sight of Your presence all around me:

Speak to me Lord,  
so that I might show honesty and good faith to all I meet:  
and never fail to love even those people who hate me:

Speak to me Lord,  
so that I might put everything else in my life to one side  
and find the fulfilment of my life, and eternity, in You!

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## Bible Study - Genesis 40:1-15

<sup>1</sup> Some time after all these things, the cupbearer and baker of the king of Egypt sinned against their master. <sup>2</sup> Pharaoh was furious with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, <sup>3</sup> and he put them under arrest in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. <sup>4</sup> The captain of the guard placed Joseph alongside them, and he attended to them.

After they had been in custody for some considerable time, <sup>5</sup> the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt who were confined in prison each had a dream on the same night. Each had his own dream with its own meaning. <sup>6</sup> When Joseph came to them in the morning, he noticed that they were troubled; <sup>7</sup> so he asked Pharaoh's officers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, 'Why do you look sad today?' <sup>8</sup> They answered him, 'We have had dreams but there is no one who can interpret them.' Joseph said to them, 'Surely, interpretations belong to God? Now, tell them to me.'

<sup>9</sup> So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph; 'In my dream there was a vine in front of me, <sup>10</sup> and on the vine there were three branches; as soon as it budded, it blossomed and the clusters ripened into grapes. <sup>11</sup> Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, so I took the grapes and pressed them into the cup, and put it in Pharaoh's hand.'

<sup>12</sup> Joseph said to him, 'This is what it means: the three branches are three days; <sup>13</sup> and within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position; and you will place Pharaoh's cup in his hand just as you previously did when you were his cupbearer. <sup>14</sup> But remember me when all goes well with you; please do me the favour of mentioning me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this prison. <sup>15</sup> For the truth is that I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and I have done nothing wrong here to deserve being put in prison.'

## Review

We now enter a world of ancient beliefs about dreams and interpretations, something which is alien to most modern and secular cultures, and quite difficult for many people today to take seriously today. The story of Pharaoh's officials who ended up on the wrong side of their master is entertaining, but we must remember that it was a deadly serious matter for people of those times. People's lives did indeed depend upon the interpretation of dreams and vision, and Joseph's ability to use this as a means to speak of God and also pursue his own ends is fascinating. This passage brings together a number of important themes for the story of Joseph.

The two senior ranking officials from the court of Pharaoh who joined Joseph in jail were the 'cup-bearer' and the baker. The reason for their incarceration was the wrath of their master over wrongdoings not reported in Scripture, but it is fair to assume that absolute rulers such as Egypt's Pharaoh dispensed both favour and punishment upon people with little excuse or reason. As far as Joseph was concerned, the presence of the cup-bearer and the baker was an opportunity to make contact with yet more high ranking officials in Egypt, and his special position of favour meant that he was placed with them and had some responsibility for looking after them (40:4), at a time when they were in particular need. Many people have attempted to work out how long Joseph remained in the employment of Potiphar and how long he spent in jail, but there is no clear guidance. It certainly seems to have been a long time, and most estimates suggest Joseph was in his late twenties by the time the events in our passage today took place. At the very least, he had plenty of time to spend with these significant characters and learn about their life; he learned not just about the Egypt in which he found himself, but also the court of Pharaoh and the etiquette and manners required of one who wished to survive in the presence of Pharaoh.

Significantly, Joseph continued to live as a man of faith, aware of the active presence of God within the circumstances of life (as we saw yesterday - 39:21). When faced with the problems and questions of the two men he served in the prison, Joseph was quick to give God the honour as the only true source of help (40:8). In those days, people believed that during sleep, they came nearer to the world of spirits and gods; and dreams were regarded as reflecting this world. They would have believed that it was only possible to interpret dreams by having access to the official priests and magicians of Egypt; people who were not accessible in prison. Joseph's assertion that God was the only interpreter of dreams, and that he was able to interpret dreams was, from their point of view, revolutionary! We might easily read these details as just another part of the story, but all this was of immense theological and practical significance. Joseph's early experiences with dreams were God's way of leading him to a place where he was comfortable with dreams and their interpretations; a subject which was something of great fear and trepidation for most Egyptians.

In Joseph's words and deeds, there was a mixture of godliness and a natural concern for his own survival. On the one hand, he was eager to address the concerns of Pharaoh's officials by interpreting their dreams, but he was also intent upon doing all he could to take advantage of the situation in order to get out of prison. Having given an interpretation of the cup-bearer's dream, Joseph begged the man to remember him when he was released (40:14) and plead with Pharaoh for the justice of his cause. It is hardly possible that Pharaoh would have been interested in his case, but Joseph was gifted with optimism and a belief that he was able to attain to the highest heights because God was with him. From his youth, Joseph knew that God was with him, and he had the confidence to believe that God could use any means to enable him to get out of prison to fulfil his calling!

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The two officials and their dreams
- The interpretation of the dream of the chief cup-bearer

## Going Deeper

This is a simple story, but what exactly did Potiphar have to do with what it all? His job description was 'captain of the guard', and it seems he placed the two court officials in jail together with Joseph. Then later, when the two officials had dreams, there were all kinds of spiritual implications to what was going on, and why the two of them were not happy about the dreams. Joseph used their fears to gain their acceptance and call for his liberty.

### ***The two officials and their dreams.***

We have already met the court official, Potiphar. In the study of two days ago, we read about the Potiphar's role as 'captain of the guard' (39:1,2), a role which may have been military, but which may also have included the task of eating food and drinking wine presented to Pharaoh in order to protect the king of Egypt from the threat of poisoning. It is interesting therefore that the two people thrown into jail are two people responsible for Pharaoh's food and drink. Some have therefore suggested that Potiphar would have made the accusations that placed the cup-bearer and the baker into prison! This is all supposition, but Scripture does say that their placement in prison and with Joseph as their 'servant', was all arranged by the 'captain of the guard', the same title as held by Potiphar; (40:4), a man who clearly had more authority than the chief jailer who had previously placed Joseph in charge of the whole prison (39:21f.)!

Whatever the reason, the Hebrew description of Pharaoh's anger at the two officials was 'furious' (40:2), and it was a very strong word; the prisoners were in for a long stay (40:4). In due course, the uncertainty of the situation was broken by something that would have been deeply disturbing to the two high officials of Pharaoh's court. With strong emphasis within the Hebrew text, Scripture describes how the two of them had dreams on the same night, but each dream was different and was therefore presumed to have a different meaning (40:5). This would have been troubling to the two for they would have believed that their dreams were part of the same spiritual reality and should show common features, but as we shall find out, there were very different. Two people having different dreams would not seem remarkable to us today, and we find it hard to imagine how the cup-bearer and the baker could not see the obvious differences between their two dreams and what they meant. However, they would have looked for common features, but there was little to observe (in contrast to Pharaoh's repeated dreams in later chapters which all indicated the same thing – see Gen 41f.)

Joseph broke the deadlock of their concern by his comment 'surely, interpretations belong to God?' (40:8). Now, this is a little contentious, but depending upon which version of ancient Egyptian chronology (method of dating) you accept, all this was happening at a time when traditional Egyptian beliefs were being challenged. There were some within the country who believed in 'one god' (identified as the 'sun god'), and in the royal circles of Egypt there was serious division between those who believed in the traditional spirit world of ancient Egypt and talk of the all-embracing power of the 'sun-god' (called the 'Aten', as in the name of the Pharaoh 'Akenaten'). Now, if Joseph suddenly began to talk about one God, in all innocence, he may well have touched on a dangerous political subject that challenged traditional Egyptian beliefs to the core.

### ***The interpretation of the dream of the chief cup-bearer***

In asking the cup-bearer and the baker to tell their dreams to him, Joseph was making a direct claim to the Egyptians that he had contact with the one and only God who could interpret dreams. From the perspective of the Egyptians, they would have been somewhat uncertain how to respond to what he said. Was he some kind of Hebrew 'priest'? It is remarkable that the two officials trusted him. From our perspective, we are delighted to see that Joseph now accepted that God was with him, and his youthful ability to interpret dreams was now a full grown spiritual gift.

It was the cup-bearer who first found courage to tell Joseph his dream, and it was important that he heard one dream separate from the other so that God's message for each individual would not become mixed up with the message for the other. The dream (40:10) is easy to understand, and what he saw in the dream was a speeded up version of producing grapes by the vine, ending with the cup-bearer back at his old job, preparing wine for Pharaoh to drink (4:11). Joseph responded to this with the obvious interpretation, declaring that Pharaoh would soon 'lift up' the head of the cup-bearer (40:13) and restore him to office. The phrase 'to lift up someone's head' is a literal translation of verse 13, but it was an ancient Hebrew colloquialism for 'showing someone favour', which is what it clearly means here. In tomorrow's reading, we will find that Joseph switches around the meaning of the same word to the detriment of the baker!

After the interpretation, Joseph adds his own call to the cup-bearer (40:14,15) to remember him and help him. What is fascinating about this is that Joseph uses language that is similar to other places in Scripture where God's people call to the Lord for help. For example, Joseph begins 'remember me ...' This is the same word which indicates God's concern for Noah in the ark (8:1f.), and in Genesis as a whole, when God 'remembers' someone, he begins to save them (see also 9:15, 19:25, 30:22 and also Ex 2:24). Because of this, Joseph's call for help comes across as much as a call to God for salvation as it does a call to the cup-

bearer to get him out of jail. The use of this 'salvation' language was irrelevant to the cup-bearer, and he forgot it for some time (see 40:21), but God heard the call of Joseph's heart. Joseph knew God was with him, and he called on the Lord to deliver him because of his wrongful treatment (40:15).

## Application

Few of us would claim to have the ups and downs of life experienced by Joseph, but we have certainly had some. Joseph appears to have been able to wait in a godly way, confident that the Lord would prevail, save him and proceed to do His work in the world. Our own hopes should be no less. Sometimes, however, we need to call out to God in the midst of what is happening and ask the Lord to remember us, to 'call us to mind' and restore us to where we can get on with the work that we know He has for us to do. The people of Israel called out to the Lord to save them from their slavery in later years, and what Joseph did in this story anticipates this call. How much more, now that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, can we call on Him to rescue us from any situation so that we might be able to do His will.

Lastly, we do not frequently place much emphasis on dreams and their interpretation. Perhaps, because of our culture which regards dreams as mere electrical signals in the brain making connections which aid our sleep functions, we too easily dismiss the idea that as spiritual beings, perhaps God is still able to speak to us in this way. Certainly, Scripture has a number of references to the importance of dreams and their interpretation (Gen 20:3f. 31:10f. Dan 2:3f. Matt 2:12f., Acts 17, etc.). Neither should we elevate the idea of visions above dreams, just because we have less by way of scientific explanations about happens when someone 'sees' a vision, or because of some unspoken ageism which we might apply to the famous biblical quote 'your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams' (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17). Both are a matter of the spirit, and they depend upon our having a spirit which is willing to be receptive to God; for God reveals Himself to young and old through dreams and visions if we are prepared to receive His revelation.

Joseph was a young man who dreamt dreams and came to understand spiritually when they were a message from God. There is no reason why this skill should not develop from God's blessing upon us even today.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Bearing in mind what is said in the study above, discuss the role of Potiphar in this drama. What could he possibly have been doing?
2. Joseph had been in charge of the jail, but he was then put in charge of two officials in prison. How would you have responded to this if you were Joseph?
3. Discuss the role of dreams and their interpretation in the life of God's people today.

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*It is quite hard to speak about dreams and visions today. People quickly accuse any who suggest that they have meaning as a little mad. Nevertheless, I do believe that we should be as open to God's guidance in these ways as we are to other means of revelation. Indeed, we may see visions more clearly if we are willing to receive them day or night! I can testify that some of the most important things God has said to me have come through brief visions and pictures. These have identified the way God works, or other ways of looking at what has been happening to me.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *You will probably have had a number of dreams in your life; occasions when you have awoken with a vivid memory of something which happened to you in a dream. Has it ever occurred to you that whether pleasant or not, the reason why you vividly remember some parts of it may be because the Lord has a message for you through this revelation?*
- *Pray for people who feel that they have no guidance in life, and ask the Lord to open their hearts and their eyes to ways in which God is working in their lives.*

## **Final Prayer**

We commit into Your hands this day, Lord God, the troubles and trials we each experience. We ask for Your protection against all the evils of the world which affect us in our homes and churches. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, lead us out of darkness into Your great light, we pray: AMEN

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